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THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

SGRAFFITO WORK.

By Heywood Sumner.

THE Italian words graffiato, sgraffiato, or sgraffito mean scratched, and scratched work is the oldest form of graphic expression and surface decoration used by man.

The term sgraffito is, however, specially used to denote decoration scratched or incised upon plaster or potter's clay while still soft, and for beauty of effect depends either solely upon lines thus incised according to design, with the resulting contrast of surfaces, or partly upon such lines and contrast, and partly upon an undercoat of color revealed by the incisions; while, again, the means at disposal may be increased by varying the colors of the undercoat in accordance with the design.

Of the potter's sgraffito I have no experience, but it is my present purpose briefly and practically to examine the method, special aptitudes and limitations of sgraffito as applied to the plasterer's craft.

First, then, as to method. Given, the wall intended to be treated; granted, the completion of the scheme of decoration, the cartoons having been executed in several colors, and the outlines having been pricked, and, further, all things ready for beginning work. Hack off any existing plaster from the wall; when bare rake and sweep out the joints thoroughly; when clean, give the wall as much water as it will drink; lay the coarse coat, leaving the face rough in order to make a good key for the next coat; when sufficiently set fix your cartoon in its destined position with slate nails; pounce through the pricked outlines; remove the cartoon; replace the nails in the register holes; mark in with chalk spaces for the different colors as indicated by the pounced impression on the coarse coat; lay the several colors of the color coat according to the design as shown by the chalk outlines; take care that in so doing the register nails are not displaced; roughen the surface so as to make a good key for the final coat; when sufficiently set, follow on with the final surface coat, only laying as much as can be cut and cleaned up in a day; when this is sufficiently steady fix up the cartoon in its registered position; pounce through the pricked outlines; remove the cartoon and cut the design in the surface coat before it sets; then, if your register is correct, you will cut through to different colors according to the design, and in the course of a few days the work should set as hard and homogenous as stone, and as damp proof as the nature of things permits.

The three coats above referred to may be gauged as follows:

Coarse Coat.—Two or three of sharp clean sand to one of Portland, to be laid about three-quarters of an inch in thickness. This coat is to promote an even suction, and to keep back damp.

Color Coat.—One of color to one and a half of old Portland, to be laid about one-eighth of an inch in thickness. Specially prepared distemper colors should be used, and amongst such should be mentioned golden ochre, Turkey red, Indian red, Manganese black and lime blue.

Final Surface Coat.—Aberthaw lime and selenitic cement, both sifted through a fine sieve. The proportions of the gauge depend upon the heat of the lime—or, Parian cement sifted as above. This may be useful in a dimly lighted building, as it dries out very white, but it sets too quick for convenience—or, three of selenitic cement to two of silver sand, both sifted as above. This may be used for outdoor work.

Individual taste and experience must decide as to the thickness of the final coat, but if laid between one-eighth and one-twelfth of an inch, and the lines cut with slanting edges, a side light gives emphasis to the finished result, making the outlines tell alternately as they take the light or cast a shadow. Plasterer's small tools of various kinds, and knife blades fixed in tool handles will be found suited to the simple craft of cutting and clearing off the final surface coat; but as to this a craftsman finds his own tools by experience, and indeed by the same acquired perception must be interpreted all the foregoing directions, and specially that ambiguous word, dear to the writers of recipes—sufficient.

Thus far method. Now as to the special aptitudes and limitations. Sgraffito work may claim a special aptitude for design whose center of aim is line. It has no beauty of material like glass, no mystery of surface like mosaic, no pre-eminence of subtly woven tone and color like tapestry; yet it gives freer play to line than any of these mentioned fields of design, and a cartoon for sgraffito can be executed in *fac simile*, undeviated by warp and woof, and unchecked by angular or lead lines. True, hardness of design may easily result from this aptitude, indeed it is to a certain extent to the method under examination, but in overcoming this danger and making the most of this aptitude the artist is discovered.

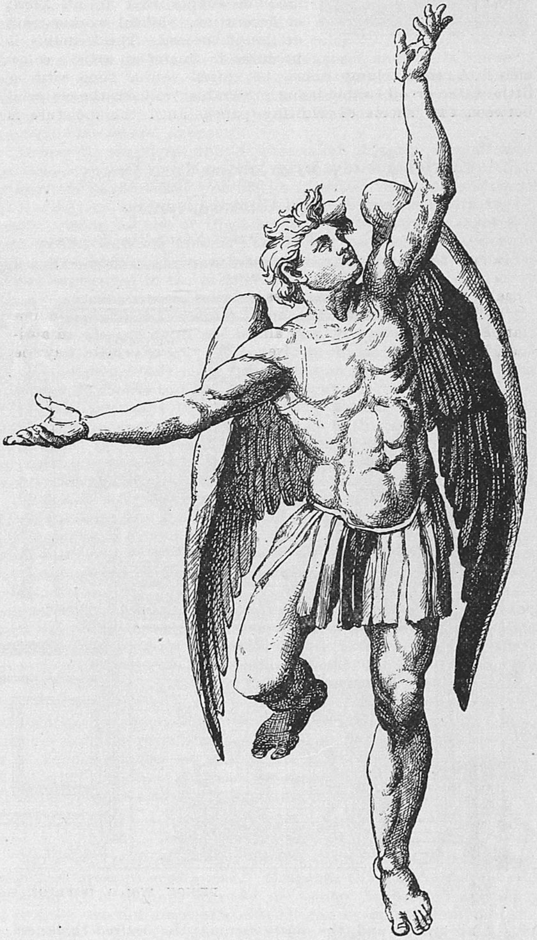


FIGURE IN SGRAFFITO, BY F. W. MOODY.

Sgraffito, from its very nature, "asserts the wall;" that is, it preserves the solid appearance of the building which it is intended to decorate. The decoration is in the wall, rather than on the wall. It seems to be organic. The inner surface of the actual wall changes color in puzzling but orderly sequence, as the upper surface passes into expressive lines and spaces, delivers its simple message, and then relapses into silence; but whether incised with intricate design, or left in plain relieving spaces, the wall receives no further treatment, the marks of float, trowel and scraper remain, and combine to make a natural surface, It compels the work to be executed *in situ*. The studio must be exchanged for the scaffold, and the result should justify the inconvenience. However carefully the schemes of decoration may be designed, slight, yet important modifications and readjustments will probably be found necessary in the transfer from cartoon to wall; and though the ascent of the scaffold may seem an indignity to those who prefer to suffer vicariously in the execution of their works, and though we of the nineteenth century know, as Cennini of the fifteenth century knew, "that painting pictures is the proper employment of a gentleman, and with velvet on his back he may paint what he pleases," still the fact remains, that if decoration is to attain that inevitable fitness for its place which is the fulfillment of design, this "proper employment of a gentleman" must be postponed and velvet exchanged for blouse.

It compels a quick, sure manner of work; and this quickness of execution, due to the setting nature of the final coat, and to the consequent necessity of working against time, gives an appearance of strenuous ease to the firm incisions and spaces by which the design is expressed, and a living energy of line to the whole. Again the setting nature of the coat suggests, and naturally lends itself to, an occasional addition in the shape of mosaic to the means at disposal, and a little glitter here and there will be found to go a long way in giving points of emphasis and play to large surfaces.

It compels the artist to adopt a limited color scheme—a limitation. and yet one that may almost be welcomed as an aptitude, for of colors in decorative work multiplication may be said to be a vexation.

Finally the limitations of sgraffito as a method of expression are the same as those of all incised or line work. By it you can express ideas and suggest life, but you cannot realize and imitate the natural objects on which your graphic language is founded. The means at disposal are too scanty. Item—white lines and spaces relieved against and slightly raised on a colored ground; colored lines and spaces slightly sunk on a white surface; intricacy relieved by simplicity of line, and again either relieved by plain spaces of colored ground or white surface. Indeed they are simple means. Yet line still remains the readiest manner of graphic expression; and if in the strength of limitation our past masters of the arts and crafts have had power to "free, arouse, dilate" by their simple record of hand and soul, we also should be able to bring forth new achievement from old method, and to suggest the life and express the ideas which sway the latter years of our own century.

REPOUSSE WORK.

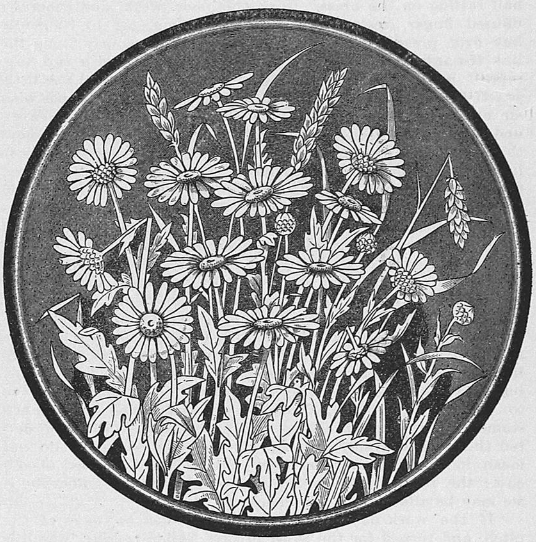
REPOUSSE work may best be described as sheet metal, chased or ornamented on the front, and embossed or raised from the back. It may be adapted to a variety of purposes, such as tea trays, waiters, plaques for wall decoration, picture and mirror frames, girandoles, sconces, finger-plates and esutcheons for doors, jardinieres, handkerchief and other boxes, as well as panels for furniture and doors, not to mention the pretty billows and tea kettles now so fashionable.

The tools used in working, viz., tracers, mats and raisers, are very simple, and many of them may be made at home by any one who can use a file and temper steel, but they are easily obtained at most good tool shops.

Repousse articles are sometimes worked on wood or lead, but by far the most satisfactory way where any degree of relief, as well as absolute accuracy are desired, is the "pitch process," which we will now proceed to describe.

First of all it must be decided what articles we are going to make, so as to get a proper sized pan made to hold the pitch. Suppose we decide on finger-plates and waiters, we shall require a pan or tray made of sheet iron, fifteen inches square, and turned up about one and one-half inches at the sides and wired. Any tinsmith can make this, or perhaps a disused dripping pan might be found which would answer the purpose just as well, provided it did not leak. Next we will melt about 12 pounds of prepared pitch in a three-legged iron pot, and pour it into the pan. This so-called pitch is not pure pitch, but a special mixture carefully prepared for the purpose, which can be obtained from any place where the brasses and tools are sold. It can be made at home, though, with very little trouble, by carrying out the following recipe: Put into the pot 7 pounds of best pitch, 2 pounds resin, ½ pound of Russian tallow; when these ingredients are nicely melted, stir in gradually 7 pounds of plaster of Paris. This makes a useful preparation. In summer it may be found necessary to remelt the pitch, and to add a little more plaster of Paris if it works too soft. The proper pitch to buy is that sold in small boxes or barrels, and it should be broken up in small pieces before being melted. Now we are ready for the brass, which may be had of most ironmongers or sheet metal warehouses, and of several thicknesses.

Suppose we choose to begin on a pair of finger plates, we shall require a piece of brass, No. 25 gauge, large enough to make two finger plates, allowing a margin of a quarter of an inch round the design. On this the design must be transferred by means of carbonized paper, *i. e.*, by laying a piece of carbonized paper between the design and the brass, and then going over the lines of the drawing with a sharp pointed penholder or knitting needle, when it will be found that the design has been transferred by means of the black paper to the brass. As, however, these marks soon rub off in working, it is best to go over the design once more with pen and ink, at the same time correcting any errors and giving vigor to the drawing. (All tracings are tame and poor unless very well done, and more than repay the trouble of inking.) Should the brass be at all bent, it will be advisable to hammer it oll over on a flat table, until level again, with the flat end of a mallet. As this mallet will be found very useful in all stages of repousse work, we had better describe it. The best for the purpose is a common wooden mallet, flat at one end and rounded at the other. Having got the brass nice and flat it now remains to put it on the pitch. There are various ways of accomplishing this, but we have found that by far the best plan is to put the pan on the fender before the kitchen fire, until the surface of the pitch softens, and then, after warming the back of the brass, to put it on the pitch face upwards, pressing it well down all over, and turning a little pitch over the edge of the brass to prevent its flying off when the hammering begins. A



Ox-Eye Daisy and Wheat Design for Repoussé Plaque.